Land, Body, Being:
Enheartening Land Ethics on Indigenous Earth

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Indigenous Religious Traditions in the Americas: The Face-and-Heart of Spirit
Dr. Inés Hernández-Ávila
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"I asked some artists, 'Why don't we the artists all commit to the Mother Earth?[1]'"

—FRANCISCO "PANCHITO" RAMIREZ ROJAS, *DREAMING MOTHER EARTH*

This paper is a step in articulating and assembling a perspective on land ethics that is grounded in the writings, art, conversations, and viewpoints brought forth in our course *Native American and Indigenous Religious Traditions,* in constellation with relevant and resonant additional Indigenous perspectives. The writing intends to share an orientation to a right relationship with land that is based in the wisdom of the earth as living, in reciprocity with the experience of being, being together, and being embodied. The quotation above comes from *Dreaming Mother Earth: The Life and Wisdom of Native Cuban Cacique Francisco "Panchito" Ramirez Rojas,* edited by José Barreiro, and shares Panchito's life experiences in deep communion with the land and peoples of the Cuban Guantánamo-Baracoa mountains, and expresses a syncretic and life-affirming relationship with people, land, and the creative spirit.

Weeks before, in the second class discussion, Professor Inés Hernández-Avila stated that it is important that "we think about revitalization in terms of the entire community."[2] While Dr. Hernández-Avila was referring to our readings on the Hoopa Valley Tribe of Northern California at the time, this view has guided me through these months in reflection as a settler living on stolen land, how land is inherently interconnected with human-beings and all living things and how reciprocity is a spiritual and creative practice. This interrelatedness has time again been invisibilized and appropriated by dominant ideological practices, as settler colonialism reifies binary thinking.[3] Embracing relatedness is one way into engaged intimacy with the land. In our

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[1] Barreiro, José. *Dreaming Mother Earth: The Life and Wisdom of Native Cuban Cacique Francisco "Panchito" Ramirez Rojas*. New York: Editorial Campana, 2018, 95

[2] Lecture, "Indigenous Religious Traditions in the Americas: The Face-and-Heart of Spirit," instruction by Inés Hernández-Ávila, prof. Zoom, January 13, 2021.

[3] Fortier, Craig. "Unsettling Methodologies/Decolonizing Movements," *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* 6, Issue 1 (2017)

hemispheric perspective, we have been experiencing how the creative act offers access into the heart of being, and how an idea of "religion" (in quotes because English terms don't necessarily translate the multiverse of Native worldviews) is inextricably tied to artistic, activist, community-based, and legal ways, all a part of life. So, thus, a land ethic is inextricably connected to enheartened and multiply interconnected expressions of being.

The proposition in the quotation at the top of the essay by Panchito in *Dreaming Mother Earth* gets to the heart of the matter of living on land as a citizen and an artist-scholar in the U.S. today, and invites me to ask some further questions. For example, how can we as a community of persons utilize our grounded presencing, creative imagining, and relatedness to continue to pursue deep reciprocity with all living things and tend to this vast, alive place that provides us home? What is there to learn from Indigenous wisdom traditions and contemporary Native practices to support an approach that honors traditional ways? How as a white settler colonizer, can I (we) pluralize my (our) approaches in earth stewardship without appropriating these traditions? Phrased in another way, how to be in right relation with these ideas without perpetuating the violence of extraction? What does contemporary sovereignty look like, and what could Land Back be? What kinds of actions are useful for the defense of the sovereignty of Native Americans and Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as well their "inalienable right to protect this land"?[4] How are land ethics a spiritual matter? And what are the potentials for "co-producing" (Kim Tallbear, Ana Mariella Bacigalupa) amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous people? While I certainly will not answer all these questions here comprehensively, this essay is a humble and committed turn in that direction.

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https://umanitoba.ca/faculties/social_work/media/V6i1-02_fortier.pdf

[4] Elder Jo-Ann Saddleback in Riddle, Emily, "I have the inalienable right to protect this land." *briarpatch* 49, no. 5 (Sept/Oct 2020), 4.

Some of the sentiments addressed in my questions are enhanced in an article by Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity," in which the authors propose an orientation for settler scholars to uplift Native lifeways, "not standing on the backs of Indigenous peoples but engaged as related comrades joined in critical co-resistance against the convergence of forces that divide and conquer us and the Earth upon which we depend."[5] In the article, the authors explain how Indigenous dispossession alongside antiblackness and heteropatriarchy inform state power. They further explain *settler colonialism* as a structure of domination, oppression, and genocide that is predicated on this ongoing dispossession that forms the authorities that govern Indigenous relations with the lands they have lived on for time immemorial. Kim Tallbear further explains the nature of settler colonialism through its ideas of "inevitable progress and ethical linearity."[6] Ethical frameworks provided by Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge are based in deep reciprocity, drawing from creative world-making, and upend colonialism by rewriting narratives of change.[7] A land ethic requires a commitment to leaning in to Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge formations and developing actual kinships necessary for genuine engagement.

I'd like to say some about myself, to ground this essay in my own position for the writing. I am a Jewish, queer choreographer, dancer, educator and cultural organizer who grew up in the ancestral lands of the Munsee Lenape and Wappinger people, also known as New York City. As an adult, I moved to Huchiun, unceded Lisjan Ohlone land, known as California, East Bay, following my lesbian mentor, my late aunt Patti Roberts who moved here in the late 1960's.

[5] Coulthard, Glen and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-based Solidarity," American Quarterly 69, no 2 (June 2016), 249-255.
[6] Tallbear, Kim, "Feminist, Queer, and Indigenous Thinking as an Antidote to Masculinist Objectivity and Binary Thinking in biological Anthropology," Vital Topics Forum, Situating Science 465. *AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST* 121, no. 2 (2019). 495.
[7] Coulthard and Betasamosake Simpson, 251.

My family immigrated to the U.S. from Lithuania, Russian Odessa, and the Ukraine in the early 1900's. I come from a line of diasporic peoples, and I often feel most clear and creative on the road, in movement. In experiencing the depth of relation to the land of some of my fellow classmates, it has become ever clearer that my roots on U.S. soil are startlingly young, that there is potential for more deeply exploring my ancestral lines, and that my relation to these lands requires continual self-reflection. My creative life is based in the embodied, ecological, sensorial, and social practices of movement dialogue and intercultural exchange. As a movement artist, I have explored the inherent relationships that go beyond the inheritance of Cartesianism, heteropatriarchal Capitalism, and settler colonialism that necessarily divide "person" and "earth" to an extreme. This course has deepened my perspectives of justice well beyond race into a more in-depth justice based on the foundational formations of settler colonization.

The views from these months have forever changed how I see the world, and I am committed to share these with my communities, family, and colleagues, in solidarity. The following are some basic perspectives for right relation with land.

Relatedness

In our class, I was deeply moved in the first week how each person was invited to introduce themselves, their homeland and lineage, and these introductions took place with each presenter who joined our Zoom space, as possible. This relation-building, while on the electronic-world of the virtual, created a sense of place that grounded us together, each from our own place. Relatedness, in a description of Indigenous spirituality by author David Delgado Shorter is inextricably linked to practice and to land:

> One's relations are not solely related by blood, or tribal heritage. They are families chosen and not chosen. They are the humans and other-than-humans sharing and

> withholding power. They counter solitude with solidarity. They provide meaning and identity beyond the confines of race, tribe, and species. In these ways, being related offers more than any abstract notion of religion and "spirituality" ever could.[8]

This relatedness to land is imbued in the poetics of writings such as Diné author Luci Tapahonso's *A Radiant Curve*—"Yes, it's true that a river of angry words can darken love's radiant colors," Nez Perce scholar-artist Beth Piatote's *The Beadworkers*—poetics with Treaties, family stories, "Kús HíWes Wá. Water is Life. Water is Alive," and Hoopa Valley Tribe artist-scholar Cutcha Risling Baldy's *We are Dancing for You*—with her critical history of Indigenous California and "felt theory."[9] Relatedness is also expressed through so many of the stories in Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass:* "So it is that Potawatomi and most other Indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family."[10]

Relationships Built on Consent

For relatedness to exist in right relation, it requires consent. Explicit and implicit in Kimmerer's stories about land, food, and kin are a respectful engagement with land. In contemporary cultural life, consistent land acknowledgements are one way that citizens are starting a process of opening a conscious relation with the land on which they stand, and further explorations are growing across the Americas to move land acknowledgements into a practice of heartfelt care and greater commitment. This consent is also laid out in Simpson's "Land as

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[8] Shorter, David Delgado. Hoxie, Frederick E, Ed. *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*. Online publication. (May 2016) 449. "spirtuality."

[9] Tapahonso, Luci. *A Radiant Curve* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 24.
Piatote, Beth H. *The Beadworkers: Stories* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2019), 11.
Risling Baldy, Cutcha *We Are Dancing for you: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

[10] Kimmer, Robin Wall *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013) 55.

Pedagogy," in which she states, "True engagement requires consent."[11] She additionally explains the rich connection between land, consent, and story when she explains how to visit land: "sharing oneself through story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being."[12]

It is important to note the inextricable connection between land ethic and the violences caused by cultural appropriation. Practices and materials of Indigenous lifeways are consistently co-opted into mainstream culture and discourse, —such as the United States Constitution, traditional medicines, foods such as maple syrup and teas.[13] When these are used without honoring and compensating the tribes from which they originated, this is a form of cultural extermination that can deny livelihood. A process expressed in a panel on cultural survival stated that starting with acknowledgement can bring forth grief, actually enabling a receiving of these grave inequities, that this felt practice can lead to accountability, and from there, responsibility. This kind of development of commitments could lead to a more consensual relationship with land in society.

Sensing Language

In *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language,* longtime ethnographer of the White Mountain Apache Tribe Keith Basso states, "when places are actively sensed, the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where

[11] Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014)15.
[12] Ibid, 18
[13] Beatriz Díaz Robles, Tajëëw, Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana, Francour, Daisee, Ferris, Shaldon, and Sócrates Vásquez García, "Indigenous Resistance & Struggles Against Cultural Appropriation" Cultural Survival Forum, October 28, 2020. https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/indigenous-resistance-struggles-against-cultural-appropriation

the latter may lead is anybody's guess."[14] Through telling the story of his experiences on co-producing a map of this region, Basso showed a sense of place from a few different vantages and took the time to be in dialogue with Apache members of the region over time. *Wisdom Sits in Places* described how Western Apache knowledge of places are actively sensed, "pointedly local," "highly variable," and "unfailingly episodic," and how through the process of coming into this, the landscape becomes part of being. He describes the inherent meaningful value that emerges with sensing, that already resides in the details of the form and arrangement of the elements of place. Wisdom, indeed, sits in places.

Storied Lands

The storied nature of lands was well described in our final class by fellow student Joel Daniel Calixto when he said, "when you name a place, it has life ...it transforms and creates space through the land, which is usually reflective of the body."[15] In *Wisdom Sits in Places,* Basso describes one of the ways in which modern ecological models practice conceptualization, thereby generalizing what is actually quite intimate, and removing from the level of the individual. "And it is individuals who act on and make cultural meanings."[16] Through understanding the nature of storied lands, one can deepen relation with place, and through uplifting lands as already storied, there is the potential to upend the fantasies of neutrality, to acknowledge the dispossession, as 'an antidote to settler colonial vanishing."[17] In "A Ghetto Land Pedagogy: An Antidote for Settler Environmentalism," author la paperson critiques different environmental approaches as well as the colonial roots of mapping, and shares a project

[14] Basso, Keith. *WIsdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). 107.
[15] Calixto, Joel Daniel, NAS 257 Class Discussion, Zoom, March 10, 2021
[16] Basso, 89.
[17] La Paperson (2014) *A ghetto land pedagogy: an antidote for settler environmentalism,* Environmental Education Research, 21:1, 115

he helped organize with East Oakland youth who conversed with incarcerated elders and developed a relationship with the poetics of land through learning about human resistance practices. La paperson shares how simply deconstructing coloniality is not the same as decolonizing, which is the subject of his collaborative writings with Eve Tuck in their important essay, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." He further states how people and land are not generalizable in the ways that place and space can be. He articulates the difference between dwelling somewhere and being constituted by the land from where one has lived. These ideas can serve as a guide for greater responsibility and care in positioning oneself in relation to the land they are, as indigenous to the land, as guest, and settler.

Rights and Responsibilities

Walter Echo-Hawk, Pawnee attorney, author, and leader, described this historical time for Indigenous people worldwide with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). In his lecture at UCDavis and his book, *In the Light of Justice,* Echo-Hawk explained how International law is now accountable to the human rights of native people.[18] Through outlining the history of persecution and violence of Native American people in relation to land rights, the process of bringing the Declaration into being, and through explaining its strategic approach, Echo-Hawk makes a call for self-determination, reparations, and land-based remediation here in the United States, and stated the need for a land ethic.[19] It is from the clarity of this call that I formed the conceptual roots of this essay. What has stuck from me about our conversation about the text in class was how in the context of Indigenous activism and law, to utilize the settler legal perspective on "intellectual property" protects the land through the

[18] Echo-Hawk, Walter. "The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, NAGPRA, and Higher Education." UC Davis Forum 49. October 28, 2020. https://forums.ucdavis.edu/forum-detail.cfm?id=1048
[19] Echo-Hawk, Walter. *In the Light of Justice: The Rise of Human Rights in Native America and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. (Golden: Fulcrum, 2013).133.

dominant language. While the paradigm of ownership is limiting, its use in this context demonstrates an approach towards practical reparations for Native Americans today. Eagle-Hawk explained throughout the deep interconnectedness of land ethic and cultural heritage, and the right to an indigenous habitat. He states, "cultural survival depends on a profound relationship to place."[20] Land is not only a means of subsistence, but part of worldview, religiousness, and cultural identity.

Land Back Movement and Sovereignty

Land Back is a contemporary name for the work over decades in Indigenous struggles for sovereignty, now disseminated even more publicly through #landback. Some of the multitude of actions over time range from fish-ins on Coast Salish Puget Sound (1964), to Indians of All Tribes occupation on Alcatraz Island (1969), to Wet'suwet'en land defenders today.[21] Sovereignty and Land Back get to the heart of the matter of the polemic divide between a model of ownership and one of stewardship through the interrelatedness of land. Emily Riddle, Metis scholar stated:

> European traditions would have us believe that being sovereign means asserting exclusive control over a territory, whereas prairie political indigenous traditions teach us that it is through our relationships with others that we are sovereign, that sharing is not a sign of weakness, but of ultimate strength and diplomacy.[22]

Scholar Nick Estes added to this perspective on sovereignty on the *Red Nation* podcast Land Back episode when he stated "sovereignty is not built on exclusion and dominion, but on plurality, negotiated relations, cohabitation and coexistence …on a shared territory …and could possibly include non-indigenous people, as well."[23]

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[20] Ibid, p 203
[21] Gouldhawke, Mike, "100 Years of Struggle: A timeline of Land Back events from the past century," *briarpatch* 49, no. 5, 6-7.
[22] Riddle, Emily, "mâmawiwikowan," *briarpatch* 49, no. 5, 24.
[23] Estes, Nick, "Land Back with Nickita Longman, Emily Riddle, & Lindsay Nixon," Red Nation Podcast, October 4, 2020.

Here in my neighborhood, I live right next to the perimeter of the sacred area of the West Berkeley Shellmound, the first human settlement on the San Francisco Bay—a plot of land that is being defended by an Ohlone-led coalition and is an anchor for Ohlone community prayer and ceremony.[24] Along with members of Kehilla, an Oakland-based Jewish temple, I have been in prayer and dialogue with both Kehilla and Ohlone community members inquiring what it means to rematriate land as a diasporic settler ("Jews on Ohlone Land"). Just as I was writing this section of the paper, perhaps synchronistically, my friend Jubilee invited me to meet them at the Shellmound to offer prayers to the site for the new fences to come down based on a call to action with the question, "sacred land or private property?" We walked the perimeter in silent prayer and added our fabric. May the site be returned to the Ohlone people.

"Show up at the damn meeting."[25]

Robin Wall Kimmerer said it best in quoting a town council woman above. She goes on to say, "political action, civic engagement—these are powerful acts of reciprocity with the land."

Creative Acts

It is through creativity that there are possibilities for radical reimagining of the ways citizens live together on land. And it is through the creative process that syncretic connections can be made that wouldn't come together otherwise, from the heart. This can be seen in the rematriation practices of Sogorea Te Land Trust, creating a Shuumi Tax in order to fund land parcels on Ohlone territory, led by Indigenous urban women elders and then facilitated through youth collectives.[26] Creative acts can be seen through the many ways my colleagues in class are

[24] For more information on the Shellmound, see here: https://shellmound.org/learn-more/ohlone-vision/
[25] Kimmerer, 126.
[26] "Sogorea Te Landtrust," by Corrina Gould, Co-housing Community, Oakland, September 2018.

involved in revitalization practices and projects within their own tribal affiliations, and in intertribal and intercultural projects, as well.

In a conversation with Mississippi Choctaw-Cherokee visual artist Jeffrey Gibson and Yup'ik choreographer and land activist Emily Johnson, they discussed their collaboration at Socrates Park on Lenapehoking, and Johnson spoke about a dance performance which started with creative land acknowledgements and passing seed packets to all the viewers,—one corn, one bean, and one squash.[27] Johnson stated that by giving seeds, she was trying to create a pathway of relationship. She explained further, "We need it to be real, into the ground, a kinstillatory fashion. This rebuilds the world. We also do have to rebuild institutions, ones that uphold white supremacy, yes we have to do that, because those monuments whether a statue or a university have to meet this future that we are all calling for that is about justice and equity."

Here in Berkeley, a creative project took place performing cultural exchange between Ohlone and Maori artists over several years, funded through UC Berkeley.[28] In order to engage with care, the international participants first learned one another's protocols, then shared practices such as seaweed gathering, spent time with elders of both communities, and connected through the elements, particularly fire. What was evident about an art project in this context is the necessity for relationship-building as its basis, as a cultural project, sharing stories and land.

Inspired by the three (re)'s in Cutcha Risling Baldy's *We are Dancing for You,* I wanted to offer this visual poem to enact a spot, in solidarity and as a prayer for the continual revitalization of Indigenous lifeways:

[27] Socrates Park Programming, "In Conversation: Jeffrey Gibson, Laura Ortman, Emily Johnson, and Raven Chacon," Online, March 3, 2021.
[28] Lampton Pauline, Gould, Corrina, Estrada Eric, and Caleb Luna, "Performing Cultural Exchange on Ohline Homelands in Huichin," February 1, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrjjSF-oC9U

A land ethic

new language, grounded stories,
in response to Indigenous lifeways

* * * *

(re)envision. (re)map. (re)story. (re)store.
(re)write. (re)rite. (re)right.
(re)vitalize. (re)surge. (re)build.
(re)turn. (re)matriate.

Land Back

Increasingly, as I grow in commitment and solidarity with Indigenous rights, I find myself simultaneously in alignment with the words of Kiowa artist N. Scott Momaday, "centering life in the natural world."[29] Over the course of the past several months with this course, I learned much from Professor Hernández-Avila and my fellow students, felt a slow-growing sense of connecting, even through this unusual time of virtual learning, and found the perspectives to be a great gift. And I wonder, is this a metaphor or is this enacting a growing relatedness with the heart of land, and how are these human and non-human relations in class in fact, part of the process towards right relation?

Everything is alive. The subtle acts of relation are an ongoing process and can be tended and negotiated. Indeed, I have noticed in relation to a land ethic that I have found myself trying to create order, organize ideas, and attempt to find an overview so that this writing would be legible, when the truth is it is in fact an organic process. What is the form of a matter of the heart? In reciprocity, I cannot imagine there is a formula for *how much/what/how* to offer and receive. Rather, it is felt.

[29] Basso, 35.